

THE HENRY L. WOLFNER MEMORIAL LIBRARY  
FOR THE BLIND.

Edward F. Endicott and Martha K. Stark



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# The Henry L. Wolfner Memorial Library For The Blind

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THE ST. LOUIS PUBLIC LIBRARY, on Monday June 6, 1938, dedicated its twentieth branch, the Henry L. Wolfner Memorial Library for the Blind, at 3844 Olive Street to which the book stock of 26,826 embossed volumes, and 1,472 containers of Talking Book records had been transferred.

This event was a fitting climax to the years of service by the Department for the Blind of the St. Louis Public Library since its establishment on January 8, 1924. In the first annual report submitted by the head of the Department, the number of books issued was 620. The following year, however, the circulation had increased to 4,692 volumes. The number of Braille books and Talking Book records circulated by the Department from year to year increased by leaps and bounds, so that in the year ending April 30, 1938, 80,391 books and records were issued to 2,740 readers. The quarters in the Central Building had been much outgrown.

The work of the Department hitherto has been confined solely to the circulation of Braille books, but, with the opening of the Henry L. Wolfner Memorial Library, it is being broadened with the view to improving the cultural and social life among the sightless, and at the same time creating a general and better understanding of the blind and their problems by the sighted public.

Dr. Meyer Wiener became interested in the work done for the blind by the Public Library, and interested other public spirited citizens. A corporation was formed

for the purpose of raising sufficient funds to purchase, alter, and equip the building which was presented to the St. Louis Public Library with the understanding that its facilities would be devoted exclusively to work for the blind. The building was dedicated as a memorial to Henry L. Wolfner, formerly prominent in St. Louis as an eye specialist.

A space 85' x 40' on the first floor and a room of the same size in the basement are equipped with steel stacks which will accommodate 40,000 volumes of Braille books and Talking Book records. These stacks are well lighted, being equipped with a sixty watt light with a Goodrich shade every six feet. In the front of the building, a space 38' x 48' accommodates the library offices and a reading room where blind patrons may come and do reference work or recreational reading.

On the second floor, there are three meeting rooms furnished with tables, chairs, radios, a Braille typewriter, and pianos. On this floor, also, is a small kitchen containing an electric refrigerator and an electric stove, silverware, glass, and chinaware to be used by organizations of the blind who wish to serve refreshments at their meetings. The smallest of the three meeting rooms is intended for committee meetings. The next in size will seat about one hundred persons, and the other is a very spacious room intended for large meetings. The new building meets the vital need of organizations of the blind for a place where they may gather for social and cultural purposes.

WOLFNER  
MEMORIAL  
LIBRARY  
FOR THE  
BLIND



BRANCH  
OF THE  
ST. LOUIS  
PUBLIC  
LIBRARY



with a member's "synopsis of the history of music," a large order but disposed of, apparently, to the satisfaction of the group. One by one the lives of the composers were studied, the members bringing in reports upon them. Of course "the best way to understand music is to hear it," but there are many hearers whose appreciation would be heightened by what this group did.

Freedom of choice is the basic principle upon which the reading group work rests. In many manifestations it has combined to promote eager interest, steady attendance, and comparatively little change in membership through an unusual record of group longevity. The latter ranges from ten consecutive and busy years for the oldest group to a few short months for the youngest which are already planning an indefinite future.

This principle of "choice" had its roots in the Community Center movement so ardently cultivated by the Brooklyn People's Institute in New York, N. Y., fifteen years ago. The outward and visible sign of the Community Center idea was the public school building open at night as the meeting place for the adult neighborhood. Here rich and poor, all creeds and classes were invited to mingle in civic forums, concerts, lectures, and last but by no means least in the estimation of the neighborhood apparently, "mere" recreation. For when the originators of all this concentrated worthiness came in course of time to review their Center's activities, they perceived that while the merely recreational activities were well and steadily patronized, it was not at all so with the educational. It was even less so with the educational activities furthest removed from recreation.

It was in these experimental Centers that some of their leaders for the first time learned something about the class to which they themselves belonged. They learned that this "confounded, compact majority" of adults who didn't want to be educated was little different from its self-constituted leaders. And having at last learned that wholesome truth, the leaders began to ask themselves wholesome questions. What did they themselves like best to do within the field they had so unctuously termed "constructive, spare time activity"? Would they turn themselves out of an evening to hear Tom, Dick or Harry discuss civics in the auditorium of the neighborhood school? They were obliged to admit that probably they would not, although they heartily recommended it for everybody else. Or would they turn themselves out on still another evening to hear some amateur orchestra murder the symphonies; even though thereby they might help to emancipate hitherto suppressed musical talents? No, honesty dictated: they would prefer to leave that to other emancipators. Well, then, what did they like to do? What had they been doing o' nights? Omitting answers that might incriminate they replied, attending a lecture or two, many more plays. But as a steady thing they found themselves at home the greater number of nights, reading. And when they felt like it—there was a significant qualification—when they felt like it they sought out the people they

liked, and there was another: the people they liked, to talk about the books they had read and the plays they had seen. And they did not want any Community Center to make their social contacts for them!

Then might not this also be generally true for the adults who had been urged in vain to make the Community Center their intellectual and social rendezvous? The stipulations which the suddenly introspective Center leaders confessed essential for their own enjoyment of their own leisure, were, freedom of choice—choice of associates, of place and frequency of meetings; freedom from formality, academic, pedagogic.

Curiously enough these factors upon which the leaders insisted for their own cultural-life observances had, in the Community Center, been thought to characterize "mere" recreation. Was it to be that culture or education for the recalcitrant adult mass must also be based upon recreational principles? Then what was there worthy the name culture or education which might be propagated under these terms?

Reading, the leaders had concluded, was their most constant spare-time pursuit. They had said, too, that in the homes of spontaneously chosen friends they liked to discuss books. Then why not try GROUP reading, under all the conditions possible to transfer from "mere" recreation?

And that is exactly what they did. In 1929 a staff member organized the first reading-study-discussion group of the People's Institute, United Neighborhood Guild. In 1930 two more were organized. Then a significant thing happened. It became no longer necessary to organize groups. Evidently members of the three groups were telling outsiders about what they were doing, and applications for the Institute's help and leadership began to come in faster than they could be taken care of. But these applications were never from individuals who wanted to be placed in groups. Almost without exception they were from representatives of groups, native, community coteries previously integrated by those spiritual attractions which automatically insure homogeneity.

In 1932 there were eight groups enrolled. But there were ten more on the waiting list which could not be enrolled. Then the Carnegie Corporation made it possible to enroll the waiting groups, increasing the roster to eighteen, but at the end of that year there was still a waiting list of twenty.

To sum up: the workers in this reading-study-discussion group activity attribute its popularity to its recognition of natural social phenomena, the community's natural groupings and their predilections. It has modeled method and technique by careful observance of participants' desires and susceptibilities. By measurable and unmeasurable evidence its success score is excellent. And just at the moment when it could no longer be confined to its original mold, the New York and Brooklyn Public Libraries have entered the movement. It has reached a significant phase.

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